

State of City
February 9, 2015

On behalf of the Wilmington City Council, good evening and welcome to our state of the city address.

We want to thank you for being here tonight as well as those watching from home.

In 2014, we saw a noticeable improvement in our local economy.

- Almost 1,800 building permits were issued last year alone in the City of Wilmington.
- Our unemployment rate for New Hanover County has dropped to 4.9 percent.
- And economists predict that our area will continue to grow by 3.5 percent this year and 3.8 percent in 2016.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the state of our city is **strong**!

But this road to a sustainable recovery has not been easy.

I want to thank this council for voting on strategic decisions and important investments that positioned the city to recover when the great recession subsided.

I also want to thank City Manager Sterling Cheatham and the employees of the City of Wilmington for implementing our policies.

Together, our community has experienced many accomplishments during 2014.

Financially, the City of Wilmington is strong.

We have a:

- balanced budget;
- AAA bond rating;
- And, over \$27million in the bank.

Our strong financial health has afforded us the ability to make investments in our roads, our parks, our police and fire departments.

And we will continue to invest for our future.

This city council presented to our citizens a \$44 million transportation bond. And you – the citizens – spoke by voting overwhelmingly to improve the mobility in the city.

Much planning and coordination will now have to take place to make sure that all of the projects in the bond get done within the time frame of 5-7 years.

This bond will ensure that the city stays in front of and prepares for the growth of our city by the anticipated 57,000 additional citizens within the next 20 years.

I want to thank councilmembers Sheridan, Padgett, O’Grady as well as Mike Kozlosky and Assistant City Manager Tony Caudle for working to prioritize transportation projects that were put on the ballot for our citizens to vote on.

These transportation projects affect every area of our city.

This is in addition to the \$41million that was approved by council over 3 years ago for infrastructure improvements needed to keep up with the future growth of our community.

The plan’s goals were simple – to repave and repair roads that were deferred for a number of years because of the economic downturn.

So far, we have repaved almost 20 lane miles of streets and we plan to repave another 15 lane miles this year.

In the coming year, we will pave major corridors such as

- Greenville Loop Road
- Racine Drive
- 41st street.

We feel confident that we will meet the time frame that council set of 5 years to complete these projects.

Notably, one project that our citizens are very proud of is the improvements to 3rd Street.

The final item to finish on this project will be replacing the 3rd Street Bridge this spring.

We know this project will cause some inconveniences, but the bridge is very old and must be replaced and we support the NC DOT’s efforts to upgrade and replace aging infrastructure.

Another major infrastructure investment that the city is working on is stormwater, which is important to reduce flooding in our neighborhoods and roadways.

The city has made significant repairs to the antiquated stormwater systems that were built decades ago.

I’m proud to announce that the city has started work on its largest stormwater project in history – the \$5 million project to replace the stormwater drainage system in the Bradley Creek area.

We are also finishing up design on the \$3.9 million Beasley Drive project.

We will continue to invest in public spaces which our citizens say adds to our quality of life in Wilmington.

We are excited about our 6 ½-acre riverfront park. We are in the process of taking public comments into what our citizens would like to see in this park so that we can begin the design process to complete this park as soon as possible.

We are on the last section needed to complete one of our most popular amenities – the Gary Shell Cross-City Trail.

We are about to complete the last section of the Gary Shell Cross City trail between Halyburton Park and Wade Park in the southern end of our city.

When completed this spring, it will be a continuous trail of 15 miles from the drawbridge at Wrightsville Beach to Wade Park.

This multi-use trail is enjoyed by many of our citizens year round and has become one of our city's most popular amenities.

Drainage repairs are being made in the Inland Greens Golf Course along with the installation of a ¾-mile walking trail. I want to thank the citizens of Inland Greens for their patience while we obtained the necessary permits to finish this very important park.

One of the treasures in the City of Wilmington is the Wilmington Municipal Golf Course, better known as The Muni.

Designed by Donald Ross in 1926, this public 18-hole golf course experienced a \$1.5 million overhaul last year, something that hadn't been done since its opening in 1929.

I want to thank chairperson Louise McColl, the golf course advisory board, golf pro David Donovan and Amy Beatty for their hard work in completing the renovations and making The Muni even better and more special than before.

And let's not forget the city's top tourist attraction – our Riverwalk.

Recently named the top riverfront in the country by USA Today, we are weeks away from finishing the last remaining section of our beautiful downtown Riverwalk.

And I want to invite this community to its ribbon cutting later this year.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the citizens, city employees, as well as those who volunteered to serve on our boards and commissions, who worked together to get these projects done.

Scott Satterfield from Wilmington Business Development has said that economic development is not a sprint – it is a marathon.

As such, it is vital to maintain and build working relationships with those who serve in public office and those who work in the private sector to achieve positive results.

As New Hanover County Chairman Jonathan Barfield mentioned in his state of the county address last Monday, both the city and county are united in support of our film industry.

We cannot just stand by and watch this 30-year old clean industry of film go to Georgia. An industry that spent millions of dollars and helped support many, many small businesses in our community.

We will work with our local delegation in Raleigh to attempt to make our film industry competitive again.

We will continue to work together to recruit new companies to our area – expand businesses that are already here – and implement the recommendations from the Garner Report.

We as elected officials supported the county's lead in evaluating our economic development process initiatives through the Garner Report, a report that determined what we were doing right and what needs to be done to become more competitive in economic development as a region.

Twenty-one recommendations were given to both city council and our county commissioners. We met jointly and prioritized these recommendations.

Some of these recommendations:

- will take money;
- others will take coordination with other stakeholders;
- some will be implemented quickly;
- others will take years.

But one thing is clear.

If we don't invest and make the recommendations become reality, we will be left behind by **other communities** that are **willing** to make those investments for **their** future.

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I want to thank the New Hanover County Commissioners for their public service to our community.

Through our economic development partners, we have been able to recruit companies like Vertex Rail Technologies who recently announced plans to open a rail car manufacturing facility near the state ports.

Vertex will bring more than 1,300 jobs to the area, with an average salary of more than \$40,000, and invest more than \$50 million in their facility.

This was big for all of North Carolina, not just Wilmington, and will have a significant, impact on our local community.

I'd like to recognize Scott Satterfield and Wilmington Business Development for their efforts to bring Vertex Rail here.

The city has partnered with Wilm Downtown Inc. to grow the region's largest business center. And we are seeing dramatic results from this partnership.

Last year, WDI helped to attract 58 new businesses to the center city and helped generate over \$20 million in new investments in downtown.

And with the construction of more residential apartment units, WDI is also instrumental in making downtown Wilmington a better place to.... live...work... shop...and dine.

Thanks to Ed Wolverton and the WDI staff for their hard work and we look forward to continued success stories in 2015.

As always, tourism continues to be a strong driver in our local economy.

The Cape Fear Visitors Bureau reports an 11 percent increase in hotel room nights during 2014.

And with the recent distinction of being named America's Best Riverfront by USA Today, we are sure to see a continued increase in 2015.

I want to thank Kim Hufham and the Cape Fear Visitors Bureau and all their work to bring more visitors to our beautiful community.

The Wilmington Convention Center also experienced a busy year with over 73,000 people attending events at the center as well as increased revenue and hotel room nights.

And I'm happy to report that we **finally** sold the land for a \$33 million privately-owned Embassy Suites hotel that will be built adjacent to the convention center.

Indeed, 2014 was a year of transition.

It was a year where decisions needed to be made.....not always popular decisions.....but decisions none the less.

We know that change in our community will come – **change is coming** – with the addition of an estimated 57,000 new residents to our area within the next 20 years.

I thank this council for having the vision to make those decisions. Decisions that invest in our future, in our standard of living, and positions us to stay on the road to recovery in 2015.

Yes, our accomplishments in 2014 have been many.

But 2015 is shaping up to be an exciting time for Wilmington.

No matter what year it is, one of the most important services that a city provides is public safety, and keeping our city safe is a 24 hr/day - 7 day/week job.

Wilmington Police Chief, Ralph Evangelous, reported that crime in our city has dropped to historic lows dating back to 1993.

He also reported that part 1 crime in the downtown district has dropped by over 73% over the last 12 years.

Even with this good news, we have seen a spike during the last year in violent crime.

We funded a gang task force unit in 2014 and will begin funding of additional police officers and detectives that our Chief has asked for in the coming years.

We will also continue to partner with New Hanover County Sheriff Ed McMahon as well as District Attorney Ben David to go after criminals that commit crimes within our city.

We will work with our state legislators to support tougher sentencing laws for criminals who commit crimes.

We will do everything available to us to arrest people who break the law.

I want to thank the men and women of the Wilmington Police Department for everything they do to keep us safe.

Yet this is not just a law enforcement issue.

It is a community issue that will require additional interaction with citizens, neighborhoods, and non-profits to help in the prevention of crime.

On the prevention of crime, we held a series of community conversations to get input from citizens.

Their comments and suggestions were important to us.

They asked us:

- To keep our community centers open longer.
- To provide more funding for local non-profits that address at risk youth
- To engage youth at earlier ages about education and career goals
- To help in afterschool and summer programs

I'd like to also thank the Blue Ribbon Commission, Jana Jones, and Connie Majure-Rhett with the Chamber of Commerce for continuing to support the BRC and their efforts to reach out to at-risk youth.

This type of support is critical because it is a long-term solution to crime.....and that's why this is a **community** issue.....**not** just a law enforcement issue.

Under the leadership of Chief Buddy Martinette, our fire department continues to reorganize and position itself.

This year, we will open up a new fire station on Cinema Drive which will be state of the art and begin construction of a new station on Shipyard Boulevard.

Our goal was to reduce four stations down to two stations without reducing our response times. These two new stations will allow us to do that.

And our fire department has recently earned national accreditation as one of the outstanding fire department in the country.

There are more than 30,000 fire departments across the United States, but less than 200 have achieved this accreditation.

Congratulations on this achievement!

The Water Street Deck.

City leaders have long recognized the significance of this site as an asset that could help drive the local economy.

Great cities do great things. Projects like this can transform a good downtown into a great downtown.

With that in mind, the City is close to finalizing an agreement to redevelop the aging water street parking deck.

We need to replace this obsolete deck that was built in 1966.

We see redevelopment of that site as an opportunity for a public/private partnership with most of the cost picked up by a private developer while the city replaces the public parking for local businesses located near the site.

This City Council has deliberated long and hard about what should be included on the site.

We've gotten extensive public input and we've engaged professionals from UNC-Chapel Hill to help us determine the best use of the property.

We are considering several high-quality proposals for a mixed-use development that will include public parking, open space and a better connection to Front Street as well as over 200 residential units.

We will make our selection soon and negotiate an agreement that will best serve our citizens and this city.

Last year, we talked about creating a Comprehensive Land use plan. We are currently finalizing this plan – a road map for future growth.

The plan was put together with extensive input from our citizens and I want to thank all who attended one of the 12 neighborhood meetings, or participated online.

All told, we heard from more than 1,000 people about what's most important to our community as we grow.

The City of Wilmington is changing.

Drive down any of our city streets and witness construction projects.

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The

- new BB&T building across the street from us
- the new performing arts center
- the much anticipated Riverfront Park
- River Lights neighborhood
- continued construction in the Mayfaire area
- Barclay West off 17th street.

Yes, the landscape is changing.

A citizen mentioned to me lately that this is one of the most beautiful places to live in the country.

And we want to keep it that way.

We just celebrated our 275th year as a city.

It gave us a moment to reflect back to how Wilmington was:

- Smaller
- Slower
- And with a lot less traffic.

Yet, today I see a city that's transforming and changing.

Some say too fast, others say not fast enough.

Yes, we are blending the old with the new.

We are proud of our historic roots, our past, yet are appreciative of the vision of progress – the road to our future.

Our future is bright.

The plans, investments, and decisions we make today will determine what we look like in the next 25 years.

May God bless you and may God bless the great city of Wilmington, NC